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WASHINGTON

Sen. Howell Heflin, D-Ala., called Monday for examinations of top government officials like those required of airline pilots to determine any "mental or physical defect that could affect the decision-making process."

A Heflin answered reporters' questions on the nomination by President Reagan of career CIA officer Robert Gates to replace the ailing William Casey as agency director.

"This issue brings up something to me that's very important," said Heflin, known for his girth, "and that is the issue of people in very high, strategic positions that have to make decisions."

"I think perhaps we should look at the idea of requiring as we do commercial airline pilots that there be periodical physical examinations to determine whether a person has some impediment, some mental or physical defect that could affect the decision-making function."

Casey, 73, entered Georgetown University Hospital Dec. 15 after two minor seizures. He was operated on Dec. 18 and part of a cancerous tumor was removed from his brain.

It was learned after Casey's seizures that he had suffered from severe health problems for quite some time, including during the time he testified before Congress about his knowledge of the Iran arms-Contra aid affair.

"Airline pilots are required to have a mandatory physical examination every six months," noted Heflin. "Certainly those at the helm of the ship of state or the plane of state need to be competent and need to have all of their facilities with them."

He said he, for one, will try to determine if Gates is in proper mental and physical condition for the job.

"One element will be his physical and mental condition, whether he has had a recent physical examination, what his health is."